

## Stephanie Herseth

1970–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE  
DEMOCRAT FROM SOUTH DAKOTA

2004–



Image courtesy of the Member

ON JUNE 1, 2004, STEPHANIE HERSETH BECAME THE FIRST woman from South Dakota elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Hailing from one of the state's prominent political families, Congresswoman Herseth emerged on the national scene by winning a special election to the state's vacant At-Large seat. One of the newest women in Congress, Herseth was appointed to three committees important to her South Dakota constituents: Agriculture, Veterans' Affairs, and Resources.

Stephanie Herseth was born on December 3, 1970, to Lars and Joyce Herseth and was raised on her family's farm and ranch near Houghton, South Dakota. Her grandfather, Ralph Herseth, was once the state's governor; her grandmother, Lorna B. Herseth, was the secretary of state. Lars Herseth served in the South Dakota state legislature for 20 years and was a Democratic gubernatorial nominee. Stephanie Herseth graduated as a valedictorian from Groton High School in Groton, South Dakota. In 1993, she earned a B.A. from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., graduating *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in government. Four years later she earned her J.D. from Georgetown with honors and was a senior editor of the *Georgetown Law Review*. While in law school, Herseth worked for the South Dakota public utilities commission and the legal counsel for the elderly. After being admitted to the South Dakota bar, Herseth served as a faculty member of the Georgetown University Law Center and taught classes in the Czech Republic about the American system of government. Herseth later clerked for a U.S. District Court judge in Pierre, South Dakota, and for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Maryland. In 2003 and 2004, she served as the executive director of the South Dakota Farmers Union Foundation.

In 2002, when Republican John Thune decided to retire from South Dakota's sole U.S. House seat to run for the U.S. Senate, Herseth entered the race to succeed him.<sup>1</sup> She won the Democratic nomination, defeating three other challengers, with 59 percent of the vote. In the general election, she faced the state's popular four-term governor, Republican William J. Janklow. Herseth campaigned for fiscal responsibility, affordable health care for South Dakotans, expansion of ethanol and value-added agriculture, and tax credits for parents who need childcare. She also called for federal aid to improve the quality of life on South Dakota's Indian reservations. Herseth ultimately supported the George W. Bush administration's push for war against Iraq on the basis of Saddam Hussein's apparent development of weapons of mass destruction but cautioned early about the need for a strong coalition and warned that intervention in Iraq could sap resources from the nation's focus on terrorist threats. Janklow won, but Herseth made a close race of it—closing a double-digit gap in the pre-election opinion polls and eventually garnering 46 percent to the governor's 54 percent.

When Representative Janklow resigned his House seat on January 20, 2004, Herseth was an immediate favorite to run in the special election to fill the remainder of Janklow's term. She won the Democratic nomination and faced Republican Larry Diedrich, a farmer and former president of the American Soybean Association, in the special election. On June 1, 2004, Herseth won by a plurality of fewer than 3,000 votes out of nearly 260,000 cast, a 51 to 49 percent margin.<sup>2</sup> In November 2004, in a rematch against Deidrich, Herseth won by a 53 to 46 percent margin, polling more votes than any other candidate for statewide national office.<sup>3</sup>

On June 3, 2004, South Dakota's two Democratic Senators, Minority Leader Tom Daschle and Tim Johnson, escorted Herseth into the House Chamber to take the oath of office. Representative Herseth received assignments on several key committees. Her post on the House Agriculture Committee gave her a voice on issues important to South Dakota's primary industry—farming. Additionally, Herseth's seat on the Resources Committee allowed her to play a role in deciding matters of significance to her state, including Native American policy, forests, national parks, and wildlife. By the end of the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Congresswoman Herseth had introduced several measures, including a bill to amend the Social Security Act to preserve Social Security cost-of-living adjustments. As co-chair of the House Democratic Rural Working Group, Herseth is a leader for the needs of rural America, including the development of a strong renewable fuels industry.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Stephanie Herseth," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

#### NOTES

- 1 Peter Harriman, "Herseth Savors Return, Race for House," 22 September 2002, *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*: 1A.
- 2 Stephen Kinzer, "The Voters in South Dakota Send a Woman to Washington for the First Time," 3 June 2004, *New York Times*: 18; Joe Kafka, "Democrat Wins in South Dakota Special Election," 1 June 2004, Associated Press.
- 3 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.